

PLEA FOR THE POOR,

SHOWING

HOW THE PROPOSED REPEAL OF THE EXISTING

CORN LAWS

WILL AFFECT THE INTERESTS OF THE

Working Classes.

BY THE

HON. AND REV. BAPTIST W. NOEL, M.A.

MINISTER OF ST. JOHN'S CHAPEL, BEDFORD ROW. *7/2*

“Blessed is he that considereth the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.”—Psalm xli. 1.

“He that hath pity on the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.”—Prov. xix. 17.

“The righteous considereth the cause of the poor; but the wicked regardeth not to know it.”—Prov. xxix. 7.

“If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon-day. And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters fail not.”—Isaiah lviii. 10, 11.

Twelfth Thousand.

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A PLEA FOR THE POOR,

&c. &c.

THE destitute condition of numbers among the labouring classes has been to me for some years one of the most painful subjects of reflection. My professional duties have forced me to witness something of it in London, and from gentlemen habitually occupied in visiting the poor I have learned much more respecting it. There are many families in the metropolis half starved, the heads of which would willingly work hard to obtain a slender maintenance. In other parts of the country there is equal want. In the summer of 1839, several poor persons with whom I conversed in Devonshire, assured me that the whole of a poor man's wages, at that time, would scarcely procure dry bread for a family of four or five children. In various agricultural counties, if I am rightly informed, the labourers and their children can scarcely ever touch meat. But the distress among agricultural labourers is not equal to that among many of the operatives in manufacturing districts. It is shocking to look down into the cellars which are tenanted by destitute thousands in the poorer parts of Liverpool and Manchester. The town missionaries in these two towns, who living entirely among the poor, probably know more of their circumstances than almost any other persons, not excepting even clergymen, assured me last year that

the distress which they witnessed in visiting among the people, was wide spread and intense beyond description. How could it be otherwise? I saw some mills closed; others were working half time; and in the store rooms of several I saw immense piles of goods heaped up to the very ceilings, for which the manufacturers could find no profitable sale.

A recent letter in a morning paper states that there are now 1600 houses untenanted in Preston, 3500 in Leeds, and 2000 in Sheffield. And Dr. Ryan, of Stockport, in a letter to Mr. Villiers, the member for Wolverhampton, thus describes the state of that populous place; "A large amount of the labouring population in this town is insufficiently fed and clothed. The scarcity of food is productive of many diseases, and of much misery among the people. Whole families subsist week after week on meal and gruel. Payment of rent, and payment of fuel and clothing are out of the question. To avoid the disgrace of seeking parochial relief, the most extreme misery and starvation are constantly endured by families in this town; and although the standard of wages is continually falling, the necessaries of life are advancing in price, and therefore the ratio of misery is frightfully increasing."

But all English penury is trivial compared with that of Ireland. There the labourer, if rich enough to buy one, may feed his pig, but must never taste its flesh; and may raise corn, but must not touch a grain of it. Potatoes, often eaten dry, and sometimes cold, to avoid the expense of fire; form the only sustenance for a life of labour; while the rent for his wretched mud hovel, pervious to wind and rain, without window, fire-place, or furniture, must consume much of his scanty earnings, leaving him nothing but rags for his clothing, and nothing but the bare ground for his bed. In the poorer districts of large Irish towns, as Limerick and Dublin, I have

seen such nakedness, starvation and emaciated misery, as make me shudder in the recollection of them.

Every year these evils appear likely to augment. Nearly all the lands of England which would repay cultivation are already cultivated, and there are at present more labourers than enough in many villages. Our commerce with Europe in finished goods has been diminishing, while cotton twist and machinery have been largely exported; and while the hand-loom weavers have been intensely suffering from inadequate work and poor pay, there is not enough employment for those who work at the power looms. In Ireland the labourers are not employed on an average above two-thirds of their time, and wages are depressed to their lowest point.

With all this want of employment 400,000 souls are being annually added to the population.

It is very painful to reflect upon the consequences of this extended penury. Numbers driven to a debasing mendicancy have lost all sincerity, and all self-respect; numbers are irritated against that state of society under which they suffer, and seem to welcome any symptoms which may arise of riot and revolution. In town and country, in Great Britain and Ireland, the labourers are too numerous to be employed; and although willing to labour for their livelihood, they ask for work in vain. The competition for employment depresses the wages of those who are employed, while the rest, as Mr. Carlyle (I think) has said, are hedged up everywhere by property, to starve; like horses turned out, when no longer wanted for work, to graze on the dust of the roads, between brick walls and endless lines of building. To this hungry multitude, already goaded by want, into rick burning, and trades unions, into chartism, and every other expression of impatience at unendurable calamity—400,000 beings are

added year after year. What is to be done for them? Soup kitchens, tickets for coals and potatoes, mendicity societies, night asylums, and charity balls, or charity sermons, will not fatten their lean visages, nor furnish their empty dwellings, nor make them bless God for plenty. And yet God has provided plenty for them all. The earth would grow a hundredfold more corn than they want; and they have strength, skill, and industry wherewith to purchase it. Only allow them the opportunity of labouring for the food with which Europe can supply them; only fix and reduce the duty on foreign corn, and they will be fed.

Let us first consider the effect of making the duty constant. This point has been so well stated by Mr. M'Culloch, that I cannot do better than use his words. "With a fluctuating scale, every bushel of corn that can be procured is thrown upon the market when the duty happens for the moment to be low or nominal, not because such corn is really required, but because were it kept back, even for the shortest period, it might be impossible to enter it except at an oppressively high duty. In the event which very frequently occurs of the apprehension of a deficient supply being unfounded or exaggerated, the market is unduly and unnaturally depressed by the quantity of foreign corn that has been forced upon it. Were our ports always open under a moderate duty, nothing would be gained by pouring in supplies at any particular moment; they would only be furnished when necessary and would be limited by the necessity. But at present there is no room for consideration or combination; everything must be done by fits and starts; we may not have brought a bushel of wheat from the Baltic for a year or two; but prices having risen in this country, and the duty having fallen still more rapidly, we have now an instantaneous demand for

all the corn that can be had. . . . It is plain that a commerce, if so we may call it, conducted in this way, cannot be carried on by an interchange of goods for corn, as it would be were the ports constantly open. . . . Under ordinary circumstances, an increase of imports is always accompanied by a corresponding increase of exports; but to bring this about, the increase must neither be sudden nor excessive. . . . Corn is the principal means which the Poles have of paying for English goods; and as we frequently shut it wholly out, their imports from England are unavoidably below even the average amounts of their exports; so that when we have an extraordinary demand for corn, the greater part of the excess must be paid for in bullion; and instead of being benefited by its occurrence, our commercial and manufacturing interests are deeply injured.”*

The effect, therefore, of the graduated duty being to drain the country of its bullion, and to prevent the extension of our commerce, so long as the duty continues to be variable (unless it be very much reduced,) our unemployed population cannot find employment. They must continue to starve because we can find no continental market for our manufactures. But were the duty fixed, the steadiness of the corn trade would ensure a steady demand for English goods, and a regular employment of workmen to produce them.

On the other hand, the reduction of the duty would be also beneficial. The greatest opponents of any change in the corn laws, no less than the advocates of change, declare that it will cheapen bread. But every one knows that the effect of cheapening bread would be to cheapen every other necessary of life. If, for instance, the price of corn being diminished, the price of meat should remain as high as before, a greater profit be made by stock than by corn,

* M'Culloch on the Corn Laws, 4th edition, pp. 17—19.

corn lands would be instantly turned into pasture ; more animals would be brought to market, and the price of meat would come down. The same thing would happen with all other articles of ordinary use ; and thus the same amount of wages would secure to the labouring classes a larger share of the comforts of life.

But let us now observe the effect of the proposed reduction upon wages. So long as there is a surplus number of workmen, the competition among them to obtain employment, leads them to underbid each other, and depresses wages. The first momentary effect therefore of the reduction of the duty would be to lower wages ; because workmen, finding that they could live for less than before, would rather work for less than not work at all. Wages being reduced, the manufacturer could finish his goods at a less cost, and therefore could afford to sell them at a less price. The competition among manufacturers, and their desire to effect large sales, completely secure that they shall sell at the lowest price which will return them a fair profit. In fact, they often sell for a while beneath that price. Lower prices would enable them to compete with foreign manufacturers, and to find markets from which they are now excluded by the cost of production, or, in other words, by the price of corn.

By these means larger numbers of workmen may be employed, and those who now see their children starving would have the happiness of seeing them fed.

The advantage to the operatives would not cease here. Were wages reduced in equal proportion to the reduction of prices, they would only profit from the increased facility of finding work : a larger number of men would be employed ; while all, in work, would be as well off as before. But wages would not fall as far as prices. An abundance of labourers

leads, as we have seen, to a competition among them for employment, and depresses wages; but an abundance of employment making labourers scarce, produces a competition among masters to obtain them. For this purpose, masters are obliged to bid above each other, and wages rise. The extension of our commerce, therefore, by giving more employment, would raise wages; and while greater numbers would be employed, they would at the same time be enabled to obtain better supplies of food and clothing.

The effect of the improved condition of the manufacturing workmen would further be felt by agricultural labourers; for the increased demand for workmen in towns would instantly act as a drain upon the country. This has already taken place. "In 1790," says Mr. Slaney, "the number of manufacturers and workmen living in towns, was to the labourers in country districts as one to two. In 1840, the proportions have become exactly reversed, and the numbers of the former are to the latter class as two to one."* The number of families employed in agriculture was, in 1811, 895,998, and in the year 1831, it had only increased to 961,134; while the number of families employed in trade and manufactures, &c. had grown during that period, from 1,129,049 to 1,434,873 :† and on the whole, if Mr. Ward is correct, two millions of persons of agricultural origin, whose parents were employed upon the land, have since 1811, obtained a livelihood by manufactures.‡ Should our manufacturing industry be repressed, the country labourers, already too numerous, must become an intolerable burden to the parishes; but should our manufactures flourish, many will find employment as domestic servants, porters, warehousemen, artizans, and sailors. The effect of this

* Speech on the State of the Poorer Classes, Feb. 4, 1840.

† Porter's Progress of the Nation, p. 51.

‡ Speech of Mr. Ward to the Electors of Sheffield.

demand for labourers, must be the same as the effect of a similar demand in towns. While labourers are abundant and labour scarce, the farmer may obtain labourers at the lowest wages which will sustain life; but when labour is abundant and labourers scarce, the labourer can make his own terms. The extension, therefore, of our commerce would speedily be felt by the labourers, who would obtain better wages and enjoy a more comfortable existence. Their number at present pauperizes them; their scarcity would then increase their comforts.

All these advantages which appear likely to flow from a reduction of the duty on corn to English artizans and labourers, would be extended also to the labourers of Ireland. Nearly one-third of the poor creatures who are driven by hunger from their native fields to the streets of Liverpool, are constantly, as I have been assured, without employment: in other words, nearly one-third of the Irish population of Liverpool would be found, at any time, to be starving there in damp, dark, naked, and pestiferous cellars. Not only would these find work and food, but many of their countrymen from the wilds of Connaught and Munster, following them across the channel, would exchange the maddening contemplation of their forced idleness and hopeless want, for the habits of a cheerful and well-paid industry. In the same manner, numbers of them would be required for the lower departments of manufacturing labour throughout the cotton district; while the farms of Ireland being thus freed from their surplus labourers, wages would rise there as well as in England; and thus the Irish peasantry, now starved when the potatoe-crop fails, and insufficiently fed even in the best potatoe years, might begin like the labourers of England to eat cheap bread, with the potatoe-crop to fall back upon in the years of scarcity.

It seems then clear that cheap bread would secure to the labouring classes of Great Britain and Ireland more abundant employment, better wages, and a larger share of the comforts of life; and it is most satisfactory to think of the consequences which might result from their improved condition. Thus many would have their lives prolonged, who are now sinking prematurely to the grave from insufficient food. Children now dwarfed and crippled in their growth from the same cause, would grow up in the enjoyment of ruddy health to a vigorous maturity. The demoralization generally attendant upon hopeless inaction and habitual mendicancy would cease. Parents who now cannot afford to pay anything for their children's education, would then be able to provide for it; and these children, now taken from school the moment that they can earn anything, however trifling, by their labour, might then remain much longer under instruction. The new poor laws, so wise and wholesome if well administered, would be no longer felt to be a grievance, because there would no longer be able-bodied labourers of good character unemployed and anxious to obtain relief; and the million of Chartists who lately carted their enormous petition to the door of the House of Commons, too busy and too comfortable to think of grievances, would no longer hate the Constitution and the Government, because the one would seem to them beneficent, and the other would have no occasion to be severe.

With these considerations before them, ought not those who have any measure of political power, to hesitate much before they employ it to prevent, by law, this improvement of the condition of the poor? for the poor do not ask the charity of their countrymen—all they wish is to be permitted to buy with their own labour what other nations are willing to sell. Left alone they could feed and clothe them-

selves, educate their children, and provide for the decrepitude of age. Why should the law step in and say, You shall neither labour nor eat? God has provided food for them in other lands; and if no law prevented, they could easily buy it. Can it be right that the law should intercept the bounty of God, and sentence them to perpetual want?

If it be replied that grave interests require this interposition of the law, let me ask what interests? It is not very likely that agriculture would suffer by a reduction of the corn duty, since the Dukes of Bedford and Devonshire, of Sutherland and Cleveland, the Marquis of Westminster, Lord Leicester, Lord Spencer, and Lord Fitzwilliam, are all favourable to the change. Too much interested in the question on account of their large possessions to adopt an opinion hastily, and too enlightened to be easily deceived, they yet believe that the change is safe; and their opinion is surely entitled to the very highest respect. Indeed, why should not competition do in this case what it has done in every other? Imaginary alarms and forebodings never to be realized have attended every relaxation of the system of monopoly. The East India Company opposed the opening of the trade with India in 1814, predicting the ruin of the trade, yet the exports of Great Britain to that country only increased by the change. The ship owners in 1815, opposed Mr. Huskisson's inroads upon our navigation laws, and yet his measures have been proved to be wise. In 1824, the silk manufacturers predicted the ruin of the silk trade, if the duties on silk should be lowered, and foreign manufactured silks be admitted; yet the effect of those measures was, that the average consumption of raw and thrown silk, which had been in the ten years preceding 1824, under the protective system 1,940,902 lbs., became in the twelve years following 1824, under a partial freedom

of trade, 4,164,444 lbs. Similar reductions on various raw materials of manufacture have been attended with equal success.* To turn from innovations in trade to others of a different character, I may ask, what great legislative improvement has not been met by fierce opposition and numerous predictions of mischief? It was not without repeated struggles that Mr. Wilberforce was enabled to secure the admission of Christian missionaries into British India. The slave-trade was obstinately defended. For many years the apprehensions of West Indian planters and merchants rivetted the fetters of the slave; and even to this day the fears excited by Catholic emancipation, and by the Reform Bill have not wholly subsided. If other great improvements have given rise to visionary alarms, the fears excited by the proposed change in the corn laws may be also visionary; if in other processes of industry competition, though strongly deprecated, has proved advantageous, it may also be serviceable in the production of corn, and lead generally to a more scientific and less costly cultivation of the land.

Is it said, that the landlords, bearing as they do an immense weight of taxation, must be protected? As far as is needful let them be so. But while Mr. M'Culloch has shewn that a duty of 7s. a quarter would be more than adequate protection, the proposal of the Government fixes the duty at 8s. Let it also be remembered, that a weight of taxation falls also on others, who are less able to bear it. In a petition to the House of Commons, presented June 28th, 1838, from William Blaxland of Birmingham, he stated, that he then used weekly, 2 ozs. tea, 2 ozs. coffee, 8 ozs. sugar, 3 lbs. 8 ozs. meat, 7 lbs. flour, 7 pints ale, $\frac{1}{4}$ pint brandy, 1 oz.

* See Report to the Chamber of Commerce at Manchester upon restrictions in trade.

tobacco; the cost of which, freed from tithe, corn, customs, and excise duties, would be 2s. 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ d., but with these taxes, those articles cost him 7s. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ d., being a weekly tax of 5s. 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ d., amounting in the year to £13. 13s. 6d. Whether William Blaxland was accurate in his calculations or not, they serve to show that the labourers lie under a weight of taxation, at least equal to that borne by the landlords; and if the latter class ought to have protection, much more should the former. Is it not more generous to protect the weak than the strong, those who have no political power than those who have much? If rents are the rich man's property, labour is the poor man's; and while poor men do and must pay much of the direct taxes of the country, because the most productive taxes must be ever those which are laid on articles of general consumption; is it right that their labour should be taken from them, by an indirect taxation which limits employment and depresses wages? The spirit of our constitution is to protect the poor; why else are houses beneath a certain price not rateable, and carts and ponies beneath a certain size not taxed? And still more is it the genius of the gospel to protect them. The reign of the expected Messiah was thus prophetically described by David: "He shall judge the poor of the people; he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor." "He shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper." "He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence, and precious shall their blood be in his sight." Agreeably, therefore, both to the practice of the legislature, and what is infinitely more to be regarded, the will of Christ, should the weak and the poor be freed from those artificial

restraints upon their industry, and that unproductive taxation of their food, which, without serving the country, inflicts suffering on them.

Some persons think, indeed, that the country has prospered under the existing corn laws; that the repeal of them, without being advantageous to the poorer classes, would involve other classes in ruin, and that other remedies should therefore be sought for the distress occasioned by the present depression of trade.

In proof of the prosperity occasioned by these laws, it has been alleged, that our exports and imports have increased between the years 1830 and 1839; the former from the value of £39,000,000 to £53,000,000, and the latter from £46,000,000 to £62,000,000. But these facts are consistent with a great increase of permanent distress among the working classes; for during these years, if I mistake not, improvements have been made in machinery, enabling a given number of hands to finish a larger quantity of goods; so that there has not been an additional employment provided, in proportion to the additional quantity of manufactured goods.

Meanwhile, the annual additions to the population of the United Kingdom have been nearly as follows:

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| In Great Britain ($1\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. on 16,539,318) | | 248,000 |
| Ireland (1.45 per cent. on 7,767,401) | | 165,000 |
| In the United Kingdom | | 413,000 |
| Total Increase in the Nine Years | | 3,717,000* |

It appears then that there are 3,717,000 more persons to be maintained at present, than there were in 1830. Of these, very few can be maintained by agriculture; for although the quantity of produce raised has also greatly increased of late years, yet, owing to the improvements in agriculture, this has been effected with a very slight addition to the number of labourers.

* M'Culloch's Statistics, i. 445.

The number of agricultural families in Great Britain, which amounted in 1811 to 895,998, had only increased in 1831 to 961,134, which is at the rate of 3256 families; or, reckoning five to a family, at the rate of 16,380 persons, each year. But the population of Great Britain, in the same period, grew from 12,609,864 to 16,529,318, *i.e.* at the rate of 195,972 each year. Every year therefore 179,592 persons were added to the population, none of whom could be maintained by agriculture; and in the whole 20 years, 3,854,318 persons had been added beyond those who could be so maintained. There is moreover reason to believe, that the numbers now added to the agricultural families will be less than formerly, because a large proportion of profitable wastes had already been brought into cultivation. Accordingly the number of agricultural families which in 1821 amounted to 978,656, had decreased in 1831 to 961,134: and Ireland is likewise over-stocked with labourers. Meanwhile, the population of the United Kingdom is now increasing, at the rate of 400,000 per annum; and since nearly the whole of these must be maintained by commerce and manufactures, the alleged increase of exports amounting to the value of £14,000,000 in nine years, which is at the rate of £1,555,000 per annum, may still leave a vast number of persons unemployed, and allow a constant increase of permanent distress. To justify the present corn laws, it should be shewn either that the amount of employment has grown faster than the population, or that if the population has been outgrowing the means of employing them, that the want of employment has not in any degree arisen from the operation of the corn laws. But if each workman can on an average manufacture, annually, goods to the value of £200, these additional exports have employed annually not more than 7775 additional workmen. And as

the whole additional population was in each year 400,000 it is obvious that population may still have outgrown employment.

On the other hand, the want of employment has unquestionably been aggravated by the corn laws. Why were the average annual exports to the whole of Europe in the five years ending in 1836, less in value by nearly 20 per cent., than they were in the five years that followed the war? Because we would not allow the continent to pay for our goods with corn. Why have we been exporting large quantities of iron, steel, coals, linen, and woollen yarn, cotton twist, and machinery, to enable them to manufacture for themselves, against their own interest, dearer and worse goods than they could buy of us? Because they could only pay for ours by their corn, and we would not permit them. Why has the value of finished cotton goods exported to the countries of northern Europe, sunk from £4,651,681, which was its amount in 1820, to £1,607,900, which was its amount in 1838? Because by refusing to take their corn, we forced them to manufacture their goods for themselves.

Notwithstanding the corn laws, the industry and skill of English artizans has extended our commerce with distant nations, from whom we have obtained other produce besides corn; but owing to these laws, the corn-growing nations, who from their proximity, numbers, and civilization, ought to have been our best customers, have been our worst; and although the extension of our commerce has not been entirely prevented by them, it has been so restricted as to leave a large mass of poor unemployed.

As the extension of our trade is no justification of these laws, so neither does the improvement of agriculture justify them: unless indeed it can be

shown that it would not have taken place under a system of free trade. But how can this be shown? Competition ever increases skill. The moment that the silk monopoly was removed, the silk manufacture and the silk trade began to improve. In the same manner agriculture would have received still further improvement if foreign corn had been freely admitted; because the agriculturists would then have known that their prosperity depended, not on legislative protection, but upon their skill and industry. If this be true then, agricultural improvement has taken place in spite of our corn laws, not as their consequence; and has been less rapid than it would have been without them.

Although therefore our commerce has extended, and our agriculture has improved, notwithstanding the corn laws, yet since the extension and the improvement are less than they would have been without these laws, they have still contributed to the distress of the working classes, and have done mischief to the country.

In opposition to this view of the case, it is asserted, that neither operatives nor labourers could profit by the repeal.

Of the operatives it is said, that if corn should fall, their wages would fall still more; and if the price of corn should not fall, they will derive no benefit from the change. But neither of these inferences are just. For in the first place, the present scale of duties obliging us to pay for all our supplies of foreign corn in bullion, deranges the currency, hinders the export of our manufactures, and prevents the employment of the poor. But were a regular trade established by means of a fixed duty, continental nations would take our goods in return for their corn; and should the fixed duty leave prices wholly unaltered, still by opening a market for our

manufactures, only limited by our own demand for food, it would afford important relief to the unemployed part of the population. But secondly, should the consequence of a fixed moderate duty be the diminution of the price of corn, the change would be doubly beneficial to the workmen. For in the first place there would be, as we have seen, a corresponding diminution in the price of goods, and a consequent extension of commerce. In the next place, the home market would remain the same as before. The home market depends upon the consumption of goods, by the agriculturists who are less than half the population, and by the manufacturing, mercantile, and trading classes, who form the remainder. Of course, these latter three classes being fully employed, would consume as much as before. Nor would the agriculturists demand less. Rents and wages would be indeed reduced, but prices would be lowered in the same degree, and therefore the landowner or the labourer could purchase as much as before. Indeed there is reason to believe that the increased employment in towns will greatly over-balance the slight diminution of agricultural employment; and if so, wages would not fall so far as prices: absolutely lower than before they would be with reference to prices higher, and thus the labourer would be able to consume more goods.*

Nor would the farmer and the landlord suffer either from low prices or any change of cultivation,

* The trade in foreign corn would cause a demand for English goods; hence a new demand for raw materials, which would be paid for in goods. Hence a number of new ships, and new demand for timber, which likewise would be paid for in goods, and require more ships. All this fresh employment would enable the artizans to consume more tea, sugar, &c., which would be paid for in more goods, and require more ships. Meanwhile, there would be a demand for new houses and warehouses, and therefore for more timber and more ships. On all which accounts, the increase of employment would be great to many classes.

as I shall have occasion to show. The foreign market would not therefore be a substitute for the home market, but an addition to it, and the workmen will clearly have more employment and better wages.

But will the labourers derive equal advantage from the change. It seems clear that they will. In the opinion of persons of the highest authority, there will be very little loss of employment from lands being thrown out of cultivation. Mr. M'Culloch, of whom Sir Robert Peel said, in his late speech at Tamworth, that he is "one of the most intelligent and able advocates of a fixed duty," who "takes a dispassionate and able view of the case in question," "looks at it calmly, and reasons upon it closely and deliberately," "a clever and able man," writes thus, in the pamphlet which Sir Robert Peel so justly eulogised: "*The truth is, that the agriculturists have nothing to fear even from the total and unconditional repeal of the corn laws. It admits of demonstration that it could do them no real injury. It would not throw an acre of land out of cultivation, nor sensibly affect rent.*" Mr. Porter, whose intelligent and assiduous researches into the progress of the nation are so well known, referring to the fears of some agriculturists that land would be thrown out of cultivation, adds, "It is because I am firmly convinced that there is no reasonable ground for these fears,—that, on the contrary, there can be no permanent prosperity for the agricultural classes in this country, so long as any semblance of artificial protection is continued to them, that I am induced to bring forward on this occasion my contribution towards the efforts in progress for a total repeal of the corn laws."*

Mr. Woolrych Whitmore, late member for Bridgenorth, who has spent his life in agriculture, derives all his income from land, has reflected many

* Porter's Restrictions on the Importation of Corn, p. 11.

years upon the subject, and writes with equal calmness and sense, in his "Letter to the Agriculturists," writes thus: "That a great change in the corn laws is now probable, I need not attempt to prove. My conviction is, that it is not only probable, but certain; and that at no remote date. Whatever may be the result of the debate on this subject in the House of Commons; I have that confidence in the strength of the case, and in the overpowering force of public opinion in this country, when really brought to bear upon any important matter, that I entertain no doubt of the issue. That issue will be a complete change in the present system of corn laws and my conviction is, that, although this, like all other great changes, will produce at first some loss and inconvenience to individuals, it will, in the end, be found no less beneficial to your, or rather, I should say, linked as our interests are together, *our interests*, than to the rest of the community." "If we do change this law, and, at the same time, modify, with a view to the ultimate adoption of the principles of free trade, the rest of our commercial code, there is no degree of national prosperity which we may not expect; if we do not, if we are determined blindly to persevere in every species of vexatious impost and monopoly, of which the corn laws, as they afford the most flagrant instance, so are they the groundwork and support, we shall assuredly, at no distant period, reap the bitter fruits of our own folly, and see the prosperity we might have enjoyed pass away to other lands." "I entertain no doubt that every interest in this country, including the agricultural, would be essentially benefited by an immediate change and ultimate repeal of the corn laws."*

Lastly, Lord Fitzwilliam, with immense estates to be affected by the change, and an excellent un-

* Whitmore's Letter, pp. 1, 10, 24.

derstanding to judge of its probable effects, not only shares in these opinions, but has most actively promoted them. When persons so competent to judge, and so far removed from all suspicion of self-interest, concur in these opinions, with many of the most intelligent men in the kingdom, there seems little reason to apprehend that any lands will be thrown out of cultivation. Could this take place, it must be by such a fall in prices as would give an enormous extension to our trade, and diffuse unparalleled comforts among all the working classes; but those whose incomes depend upon poor land, need be under no such apprehensions. It is impossible, as various writers have shown, that prices should fall to such an extent.

But should no land be thrown out of cultivation, land-owners, farmers, and labourers, would all be gainers by the change.

1. The lowered price of corn would tend to diminish rents, but as the prices of all other things would fall in the same proportion, the diminished rent would be as valuable as the higher rent had been, for the purchase of all the comforts and luxuries of life. So far, therefore, the land-owners would be no losers. But in other respects they would be considerable gainers. The improved condition of the people would extremely reduce the poor-rates. The increase of trade, by adding to the revenue, would lighten taxation, and the relief from these burdens would enable the farmer to pay a higher rent. This effect would also follow from the increased value of all kind of grass produce. Every one has observed how large a proportion of the land near great cities is turned into pasture because of the demand for such produce. In the event of the repeal of the corn laws, there would be a similar demand throughout the country. The working classes, fully employed and well paid, would require more milk,

butter, and cheese, more meat and leather; and arable lands would in many cases be turned into pasture, not because the corn would pay worse than it does now, but because grass would pay better. But as pastures require fewer hands than corn lands, the gross returns being equal, the farmer would be a gainer by the change, and would be enabled to pay a higher rent. Lastly, while the artificial stimulus afforded by high prices has thrown an undue proportion of land into corn cultivation, by which manure has been rendered scarce, the abundance and cheapness of manure arising from this change would render arable lands more productive, and their cultivation less costly, thereby enabling the former to bear a still higher rent. Taking all these important circumstances into consideration, the reduction of the rates, the removal of taxes, the increased value of grass produce, and the saving in the cultivation of corn, can we doubt that the farmers would be well able to bear a rent, which, though absolutely less, would be, as compared with prices, greater than before.

In the next place, the farmers would have their share in the advantages to be derived from the repeal. Nothing can be more ruinous to them than the fluctuations in price occasioned by the present laws. In the years 1829, 1830, 1831, the average prices of wheat in the London Gazette were 60, 64, and 66 shillings. Such high prices would tempt the farmers to bid high for any farms which were then to be let. But these high prices also led first, to a large importation of foreign wheat, and secondly, to an undue cultivation of wheat at home. Hence, when in the years 1834 and 1835 the prices fell to 46 and 40 shillings, numbers of those farmers who had engaged to pay those high rents, must have been reduced to the greatest distress. A fixed and moderate price, enabling the farmer to know what would

be a fair rent, would save him from that unwholesome speculation, and from those terrible reverses. Under the repeal of the existing corn laws, the farmer would also be in a better condition to make terms with his landlord. We have seen that he would be enabled to pay a higher rent without inconvenience; but any rent which was unfair, he would be able to refuse. When respectable situations are very scarce, the children of a farmer, rather than sink down into the condition of farm-servants, will consent to almost any rent which may be proposed. The competition among them for farms raises rent, as the competition among the labourers for employment depresses wages. But an extension of our manufactures and commerce, providing situations for a farmer's children, as well as employment for the labourer's, must change the competition among young men for farms, into a competition among landlords for tenants: hence rents will be kept down.

But the proposed change would be still more certainly beneficial to the labourers. A certain proportion of arable land being turned into pasture, would lessen the amount of agricultural employment; but meanwhile an *unlimited* extension of our commerce, would so much enlarge manufacturing and mercantile employment, as to drain the country of all its superfluous labourers: and this must increase the comforts of the poor. For as rents will be kept down, not by the liberality of the landowners, but by the increased number of situations open to the children of farmers, so wages will rise, not from the liberality of the farmer, but by the increased amount of employment for the poor. The farmer will indeed be prospering, but should he be distressed, the poor will not suffer; for so long as cultivation at all repays him, he will continue to cultivate his land; if he cultivates it, he must employ labourers, and if labourers are scarce, he must pay them equitable

wages. So likewise the landowner will indeed be deriving better rents than before from his land; but should these anticipations not be verified, his loss of rent could not in the least affect the working class: for his whole loss of rent arising from the increase of their wages, all that he lost would be gained by them. He would have less to spend, but they would have more: his diminished power of charitable contribution, would be of less moment to them than their increased power to provide for themselves. Higher wages would far more than compensate for diminished alms. And whatever might be his own loss, every equitable and humane landlord would feel that he would have no right, merely for the increase of his income, to take by the force of law from the cultivators of the soil, more than he could have obtained from them without that artificial aid. The advantage therefore to the working classes, though happily coincident with the prosperity of the farmer and the landlord, would not be dependent upon it. The change must bring them better wages and greater comforts, whatever else may happen from it.

As we have now seen that the working classes would be great gainers by the change from an artificial to a natural state, which should leave them their right of buying corn in exchange for their labour, let us consider whether this change is, on other accounts, inconvenient or dangerous.

Because large supplies of foreign corn have of late years been paid for in bullion, it has been argued, that they would still be so paid were the duty fixed, or altogether removed. But this is a mistake. Under the present law the duties are so heavy, that corn cannot be imported till the price is extravagantly high; when therefore the price rises, it stimulates to increased production; and over production again unduly depresses the price. Besides the ruin which this brings upon farmers, it

renders an exchange of foreign corn for English goods impossible. 1,491,631 quarters of wheat and flour were required in 1831, but only 64,653 in 1834; 28,483 in 1835, and 30,046 in 1836. Thus the stimulant given to the cultivation of corn by the high prices of 1831, led to the low prices of 1835, 1836, and 1837: by these low prices the foreigner is shut out of the market, and consequently can take no English goods. When the low prices have again reduced the quantity of corn, and a bad harvest ensues, then there is a sudden demand for foreign corn, but it cannot instantly create a corresponding demand for English goods, and the corn must be paid for in bullion. But the drain of bullion, which is the effect of the present sliding scale, would cease upon the duty being fixed or removed.

There is little need to anticipate the indisposition of foreigners to take our goods as we wish to get their corn because it is cheap, they likewise wish to get our goods because they are cheap. If their surplus population can be more profitably employed on land than in manufactures, as ours can be more profitably employed in manufactures than on land, they will be as eager for the change as we.

It is as much the interest of the Germans or French to obtain cheap clothes as it is our interest to obtain cheap corn; and it is as much the interest of the merchants to obtain a profit upon English goods in the foreign market, as it is to obtain a profit upon foreign corn in the English market. The Manchester Chamber of Commerce has satisfactorily shown in its recent Report on the injurious effects of restrictions on trade, that there is no indisposition in foreign nations to trade with us, their forced manufactures and their prohibitory duties being entirely the result of our own restrictive policy.

This has been repeatedly declared by foreign officials. The Prussian Government especially, in

1823, declared by its minister, "that reciprocal commercial restrictions were reciprocal nuisances, prejudicial to all nations having reciprocal interests, and particularly to those engaged in extensive commerce; and that the policy of Prussia was to substitute in the place of reciprocal prohibitions, reciprocal facilities."* Only let us be wise enough to see our interests, and they will not be so blind as to mistake theirs.

Should this trade be established, it is further impossible to conceive that foreign governments should lay prohibitory duties upon the export of their corn. France has prohibited that export, because our sudden and fitful demands only did her mischief; but for corn-growing nations generally to lay a heavy duty upon the export of corn, would be the same thing as for us to lay a heavy duty upon the export of calicos: no foreign government would be unwise enough to act thus. Besides, if they did, what would be the consequence? Such a duty at Dantzic would drive our corn merchants to Hamburg, or the United States, and sentence Polish corn lands to lie idle; in other words, it would injure their land-owners, without benefiting the government. Under these circumstances, no government would make the ruinous experiment; and we may be sure that these corn-growing countries will very gladly welcome our traders upon equal terms.

It has been further said, that it is dangerous to England to be dependent upon other nations for its food. But the idea of independence seems to me chimerical. Not to insist upon the fact, that under the present system, there is occasionally such a demand for foreign corn, from the inadequate supply at home, that the entries of foreign corn for home consumption, during the year 1839, amounted to

* Report to the Chamber of Commerce, p. 19.

2,681,390 quarters, for which the sliding scale forced the country to pay in bullion,—let us bear in mind, that we are not now and cannot be, independent of foreign countries.

If we do not get our corn from other lands, we must obtain from them our cotton, fine wool, and silk. Stop these supplies, and the disaster to the country would be little short of any which could possibly arise from the suspension of a trade in corn. Upon the arrival of such a catastrophe, the cotton, woollen, and silk mills of Great Britain must stop. The ships which supply them with their raw materials must discharge their crews, and millions of the working classes employed by spinners, weavers, bleachers, printers, and owners of warehouses, must be thrown out of work. In such circumstances, who would feed these starving millions, without employment and without money? There might be corn in the country, but how could they get it? There has been corn in the country during some of those famines which have periodically visited Ireland, but the peasantry did not get it; and there was rice in Bengal, when thousands were dying of famine not long since in Agra, but the labourers did not get it. On such occasions, charity is inadequate. Government wants power to meet the evil, and the necessitous starve. The barns of Kent and Essex might be filled with corn, but the Lancashire artizan would still perish in his hunger. Meanwhile all imports ceasing, and £20,000,000 of customs being withdrawn from the revenue, the nation would be bankrupt, canals would be overgrown with weeds, and roads become impassable, because there would be no trade to keep them open. The rates would be overwhelming, because the poor would be unemployed; the farmers would be ruined, because their produce would be unsaleable; and finally the same ruin would seize on those landowners to whom

our manufactures and commerce have given such princely incomes, as are unknown in any country which is merely agricultural.

To this dependence upon foreign nations, it would add very little that we should import any quantity of corn. If their interests secure to us a supply of cotton, they would much more secure a supply of wheat. For cotton may be sometimes held back with advantage, but wheat which is much more perishable must be sold speedily. Our dependence is not therefore greater in the one case than in the other; nor would our danger from this dependence be much increased in a time of war. Hostilities would not necessarily suspend our trade with any country. If, for instance, we were at war with Russia, and that government should attempt to shut against us the port of Dantzic, the clamours of the Poles, to be relieved of their crops, then rotting in the ground, would probably open it again: or should that government be in such a case unwise enough to reject the prayer of its subjects, the rest of Europe would be ready to supply us. Europe failing, we could obtain any conceivable quantity at moderate prices from Virginia, and from the Valley of the Mississippi: and should we be even excluded from those countries, there is the rest of the world before us still.

In the event therefore of war with any corn-growing nation, we have little cause to fear for our supplies, but in truth one great argument for increasing as much as possible this mutual dependence of nations upon each other, is, that it affords the best possible guarantee against the recurrence of war. Who can doubt that the important commercial relations between Great Britain and the United States, exercised lately a considerable influence in both nations upon the question of peace or war? And the same relations between any countries would

always exercise a similar influence upon them. Nations united by important interests will not quarrel about trifles, nor suffer the ambition of military glory to hurry them into an expenditure of men and money, which would exhaust their treasury, disturb their commerce, and cripple their resources.

War may be the game of ambitious potentates, but it is the horror of commercial communities; and an extensive commerce between civilized nations is therefore one of the best securities for the peace of Europe and of the world.

Before leaving this part of my subject, I must notice two other predictions; first, that the proposed change will deluge the country with foreign wheat in times of abundance; secondly, that the fixed duty cannot be maintained in years of scarcity. It is not easy to perceive on what grounds the first of these anticipations rests. Under the present system wheat has sunk in abundant years to 40 shillings a quarter, while foreign wheat cannot, as Mr. M'Culloch has shown, be sold under 50 shillings, with a protecting duty of 7 shillings. How therefore much foreign wheat, when loaded with a protecting duty of 8 shillings, can enter the English market in abundant years, it is hard to understand. Its price must necessarily exclude it. As difficult is it to comprehend the supposed impatience of the people in years of scarcity. For whereas now corn rises in bad years to 66 or 70 shillings the quarter, any quantity under the fixed duty might be imported from foreign countries at the rate of 57 or 58, and would therefore keep the price down to that level. Whether the duty may not be found to be impolitic, and be eventually withdrawn, I will not pretend to determine; but so long as it is continued, why should the country which now patiently tolerates a law which often raises its corn to the price of 66 shillings, be so utterly impatient of a new law, which will keep

it down to 57 or 58 shillings? Its quiet endurance of the greater burden, renders it probable that it would at least for an equal period cheerfully bear the less.

Should such imaginary dangers be allowed to intercept the relief which this wise measure would afford to the working classes, what other remedies can be applied to their permanent and growing distress? It has been proposed to afford increased facilities for emigration, and every enlightened friend of his country would rejoice to see this done. Let those who have sense and courage seek happier homes, if they will, under fairer skies, and on less crowded shores. Let new-born nations on the most distant wastes of the earth, give to our language, laws, literature, and religion, an almost ubiquitous influence on the world. But this vent for a distressed population must be always unsatisfactory and inadequate: unsatisfactory, because most of those who expatriate themselves would do it with the greatest pain; and inadequate, because the poorer classes, having generally less enterprise than more educated persons of the middle class, can never be induced in sufficient numbers to make the experiment. Besides, if they were disposed to submit to voluntary exile, they have not the means. Large funds would be required; and, instead of having some millions at command, the Government has to provide for a deficiency in the revenue. Direct taxes have failed to afford the necessary supplies; and whence is the money to come, by which 400,000 persons are annually to be enabled to emigrate? If this difficulty were removed, there are others behind. The prosperity of a new colony depends on the proper proportion being maintained between capital and labour. And if the number of labourers greatly exceeded the right proportion, so that there were no persons with capital to employ them, they would be

landed on the edge of the wilderness simply to die of want. Alone, therefore, emigration can never be an adequate remedy for the prevailing distress, until there is a much greater disposition among the wealthier classes to emigrate than has ever yet been manifested. Nor even then would the proposal be in the least applicable to a manufacturing population; a colonist to Canada, Australia, or New Zealand, should be a carpenter, a bricklayer, a smith, or an agriculturist. Those colonies are not about to raise factories; and spinners or weavers would be as much out of place among them, as a hedger and ditcher would be in one of Mr. Burley's mills in Manchester. For manufacturers to emigrate in numbers to distant agricultural colonies, without the slightest knowledge of the arts by which alone the colonist can live, would be to commit suicide.

One other remedy has been proposed. A distinguished opponent of the repeal of the present corn laws, after describing the present sufferings of the manufacturers, their lowered wages, and their increasing numbers, adds, "I confess it is frightful to contemplate such a state of things and of society, but it can no longer be concealed; *and yet the only remedy seems to be to diminish their sources of employment*, in order to produce future or permanent good." Inadequate employment has stripped their dwellings bare, driven them to dark cellars, loaded the pawnbrokers' shops with their pledged property, taken the clothes from their backs, crowded the hospitals, withered their limbs, and broken their spirits; and when it is utterly impossible that they should emigrate, and would be fatal to them if they could, the only means suggested for the alleviation of their misery is, that there should be a further "diminution of their sources of employment." However benevolent the intentions of the writer may be, the effect of his proposal would be very similar to

that mentioned by Mr. Carlyle, ⁷as made "in grim earnest," in a pamphlet bought by him in a Chartist shop, "that all the children of working people, after the third, be disposed of by painless extinction." It would be a remedy for a redundant population, exactly like a plague at Constantinople, or a famine in Bengal. No humane person, who allows himself to reflect, could long entertain it. And yet there is an opinion too nearly resembling it, sometimes expressed by well-meaning persons, that we ought to keep up the agricultural population, and prevent the multiplication of great manufacturing towns, with all their disagreeable accompaniments of dirt, and smoke, and noise. But this opinion is surely thoughtless. The population of Great Britain and Ireland is at present growing, by an annual addition of 400,000. The land is already so thoroughly cultivated, that while the number of families in Great Britain employed in agriculture in 1821 was 978,656, the number employed in the same manner in 1831 was reduced to 961,134. The land, therefore, cannot employ the additional population: and to endeavour to prevent the multiplication of towns, and the extension of manufactories, is to endeavour to secure that the whole additional population of Great Britain and Ireland should be without employment and without food. On other grounds too, the wish has more in it of romance than of wisdom. Manufacturing towns, though they have not the wood-bined cottage, and the clear stream, the scent of flowers and the song of birds, have much that is not less attractive to a benevolent mind. They have crowding congregations of thoughtful worshippers: they have unrivalled Sunday schools, in some of which there are from 100 to 200 regular communicants among the teachers and the pupils; and those who have seen the cottages of Mr. Ashton's workmen at Hyde, Mr. Bright's at Rochdale, and Mr.

Ashworth's at Bank Top, near Bolton, well know that the best ordered villages in England cannot furnish dwellings more clean or convenient, or with better furniture, or, in ordinary times, with a more thriving population.

Of these two remedies then, the one being inadequate and the other cruel, we are driven back to the proposed change in the corn laws. Four hundred and thirteen thousand persons, added every year to the population of the kingdom, must be employed. Emigration cannot employ them, agriculture cannot, and manufactures can. With the corn laws, they must starve; emancipated from them, they will prosper. Cheap bread and a regular commerce with other countries, will feed the people, supply the exchequer, promote morality, lessen the chance of war, and injure no one. In the name, then, of the unemployed poor, whose sufferings I have witnessed; on behalf of the depressed artizan, the ill-fed labourer, and the starving Irish peasant, I entreat every religious landowner, clergyman, or member of parliament, who may honour these humble pages with a perusal, to reflect seriously, and to pause long, ere he uses his influence to prolong the existence of those laws which, in the actual condition of our country, must lead to such calamitous results.

When our Redeemer preached the gospel to the multitudes who followed him, he also healed their diseases, and supplied their wants. Like him, his disciples should seize with joy the opportunity of affording a relief to the necessitous, compared with which all the charitable contributions of England are absolutely insignificant. Myriads of the working classes, whose interests are especially at stake, have implored the Legislature, not to vote them any public money, not to give them any unfair advantage over others, not to invade private property, but to

break off the fetters which the law has laid upon their industry; to restore them their natural liberty to purchase bread in return for the produce of their labour; to permit them to maintain their families by honest and laborious exertion.

For no fault of theirs, they are suffering the pain of hunger, with all the physical and moral evils which accompany it. God has provided for them a home, not in their own crowded country, but in a more less densely peopled. They have the ability to buy it by their labour, if the law forbids not; and the restoration of their natural right will incorporate every branch of British industry. Generously therefore, as becomes the disciple of Christ, let every Christian reader overcome all party spirit, dispense each ignorant prejudice and trampling on the suggestions of a short-sighted self-interest, join with every friend of his country to effect that extension of our trade which, while it improves the condition of the working classes, will open the prospect of unbounded prosperity to the whole nation.

FINIS.

